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ABSTRACT

A new conceptualization of interpersonal relationship, based on the notions of specific and generalized expectancies and other basic tenets of Rotter's social learning theory, is presented. Interpersonal relationships are translated into the language of social learning theory, with its established body of literature and methodology. Two studies are presented based on this new concept of relationships within a four-phase social learning theory model. Data from the studies suggest the need for further exploration of the implications of social learning theory for the study of personality, human interaction and psychotherapy. (Author/BMW)

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A SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY CONCEPTUALIZATION OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

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Running Head; A Social Learning Theory Conceptualization

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A Social Learning Theory Conceptualization of Interpersonal Relationships

In addition to the many areas of personality research to which it has already been applied successfully, Rotter's social learning theory also can prove helpful to the study of human interactional processes such as psychotherapy. While we do not question the potential value of new explanations and methods of investigating interpersonal processes an already established theory with a fund of empirical data that can be applied effectively to the study of these processes, has numerous research advantages. Among these advantages are developed methodologies and data supported concepts.

Within Rotter's theory, emission of a given behavior is seen as a function of expectancies regarding particular outcomes of the behavior and of the varying reinforcement values of these outcomes. The first of two major types of expectancies, specific expectancies, develop out of actual specific experiences with particular situations while the second type, generalized expectancies, originate from the generalization of specific expectancies to a broader class of similar situations. Generalized expectations tend to offset behavior in novel or ambiguous situations.

The thrust of our social learning theory approach to interpersonal relationships is threefold. We propose first that interpersonal styles, the basic behavioral units in the study of interpersonal processes, may be reconceptualized as generalized expectancies. Secondly, we believe that the interpersonal relationship process may be seen as a four-phase sequence of interpersonal negotiations characterized by an everchanging interaction of generalized and specific expectancies. And thirdly, we suggest that greater theoretical and empirical emphasis must be placed upon situational-contextual aspects of interpersonal styles and human interactions.

While Rotter rarely uses the word relationship in his descriptions of human behavior, we suggest that he presents a viable theoretical framework for investigating the development of and maintenance of relationships. Using Rotter's perspective, we conceptualize relationships as the interplay between generalized and specific expectancies. These generalized and specific expectancies become more or less important in determining behavior as a function of the stage of relationship. As shown in Figure 1, we conceptualize

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Insert Figure 1 here

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relationships as a process consisting of at least four major phases; choice, beginning, deepening and termination. In the Choice phase, people decide whether to enter a relationship with another. Using information from observed characteristics and past experiences they come to a decision as to whether to pursue the relationship. If people decide to pursue the relationship, then they enter the Beginning phase. Successful progression through this phase probably is dependent on the effectiveness of the opening or favorite interpersonal styles of the participants. Should the interpersonal styles

of the participants mesh in a successful fashion then the relationship may deepen. In this Deepening phase of relationships we believe a new set of interpersonal requirements develops. Because the interactors will gather an increasing amount of common experiences, flexibility of interpersonal styles becomes important here. For example, while a person's favored interpersonal style may be effective in beginning relationships, the person has to be able to use other styles depending on the situation to maintain the deepening process. While deepening can be the longest phase of a relationships, all dyads eventually terminate. Some end because of separation, some because of personal conflict others because one of the participants dies. In each of these cases the individual must be able effectively to disengage from the relationship and move on to form other positive relationships. However, many people have a most difficult time ending relationships in such a way as to create the possibilities of future growth.

Insert Figure 2 here

In Figure 2, the four phase interpersonal process described previously has been translated into social learning theory terms. At each inter-phase transition, we propose that generalized expectancies act as major determinents of behavior. Notice further, that as specific experience is gathered by the interactants, we suggest specific expectancies become more important determinants of behavior. This conceptualization is based on a basic social learning theroy assumption (Rotter, 1975) that on entering new or novel situations people will base their behavior primarily on generalized expectancies. However, as time goes on and people obtain specific information about how they will do in a particular situation, the importance of generalized expectancies gives way to those specific expectancies based on experience in that situation. You will notice that in the conceptualization in Figure 2 interpersonal styles are equated with generalized expectancies. The equation would lead to the prediction that the use of a "favorite" opening and general interpersonal style like a generalized expectancy would be apparent very early in relationship stages but as specific experiences in interacting and communicating are amassed, individuals should show the potential, at least, to vary their interpersonal styles of behavior.

In the studies to be reported we have sought to gather information bearing on the validity of the social learning reinterpretation of interpersonal processes. Two studies will be described, each representing a class of investigations dictated by social learning theory assumptions. The first assumption is that interpersonal styles may be seen as generalized expectancies. The generalized expectancy that we chose to examine was locus of control. As defined by Rotter (1966) locus of control reflects the degree to which people believe they have control as reinforcement contingencies. People who believe that reinforcements are beyond their control are termed externals. In a number of previous studies (see Lefcourt, 1976; Phares, 1976), persons with an external locus of control style have been found to be more maladjusted and more anxious than those with internal locus of control. The study (Thibodeau, 1979) to be described dealt with whether there were some interactional characteristics of externals which might explain in part their greater

interpersonal difficulties. Within the circumplex model developed by Leary (1957) and extended by Carson (1969) we attempted to assess the degree to which externals may choose, in a maladaptive and often self-defeating way, others with whom to begin relationships. In this study focussing on the choice phase of our four-phase model, it was found that significantly more frequently than internals, externals chose to be attracted to people termed anticomplementary within Carson's framework, while internals tended to choose complementary others. Complementarity in a dyad suggests that the interactors are likely to be secure and compatible with one another, while the opposite is true in an anticomplementary dyad. By choosing anticomplementary others, the external subjects appear to have been hampering their interpersonal relationships from the very start.

While not a primary focus of this study, it was also noted that external subjects tended to misperceive their own interpersonal styles. Externals tended to see themselves and act as if they were emitting interpersonal styles which actually were complementary to those persons to whom they were attracted. In fact, however, a number of external subjects were communicating one style verbally and a second style nonverbally. While the verbal style was in fact complementary to that of the chosen other and should have resulted in a comfortable relationship, the nonverbal style was anticomplementary. The external subjects were communicating in an incongruent fashion. Kiesler, Anchins and Bernstein (in press) have reviewed the literature on incongruent and congruent communication patterns and have concluded that disordered behavior is the result of incongruent communication. The above data on externals seem to corroborate Kiesler's notions regarding the relationship between incongruence and maladjustment. However, as social theorists we tend to be wary of such context-free or context-independent conclusions.

Our wary attitude results in a second social learning theory based on assumption. It is assumed that the dynamic interplay among generalized expectancies and specific expectancies within the four phase model of relationships must be viewed in the context of a situation and not in a vacuum. Carson (1969) acknowledges the importance of situational effects upon interpersonal style in his description of the perennial clown who cannot joke at his mother's funeral. However, other theorists do not seem to address themselves sufficiently to this specific issue of context. We contend that the situation significantly determines the appropriateness of such interpersonal phenomena as congruence and incongruence for example and that the acontextual conclusions drawn by Kiesler et al. and in fact supported by some of our own data may be premature. As presented in Figure 3 and consistent with social learning theory emphasis upon situational

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Insert Figure 3 here

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variables, we propose that an analysis of interpersonal interactions will show that there are four categories of congruence/incongruence situational patterns. In all cases we will be taking the simplest case of interaction, the dyad.

The first of these interaction patterns, adaptive congruence, is typified by open honest communication occurring in close intimate interpersonal relationships; this is in contrast to a second pattern,

maladaptive congruence, where a person communicates "true feelings" in a situation in which such communication is not socially appropriate. Maladaptive incongruence occurs when individuals do not say what they truly feel in a situation that warrants such genuine communication. For example, maladaptive incongruence occurs when a wife tells her husband she loves him when she does not. The final category, adaptive incongruence, (the pattern apparently minimized by Kiesler, et al.), occurs in situations where telling the truth would be socially and interpersonally inappropriate. Examples of adaptive incongruence may be found in rules of social etiquette, such as the teaching of a young child not to tell people they're ugly. Indeed, adaptive incongruence may be a most prevalent pattern of day to day interpersonal interaction and because of that incongruence must be viewed as associated with maladjustment only sometimes. Failure to learn when and where, and with whom to be congruent and incongruent may have much to do with the development of malajustment in children and adults.

In a study (Ladd, Nowicki, & Duke, 1979) relevant to the theoretical points made above two aspects of the interpersonal situation were varied: 1) the importance of the circumstance surrounding the interaction and 2) the depth of the relationship between the interactors. The high and low importance and high and low level of relationships result in the 2 x 2 table in the Figure 4. Sixty female college students were asked to respond to a Triandis (1975) type

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Insert Figure 4 here
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questionnaire in which they were asked to indicate their probable course of action in a variety of social, familial and educational situations. All subjects were exposed - to all combinations of situation importance and closeness of relationship. Responses which indicated that subjects would communicate "true" feelings to their dyad partner were scored as congruent; those in which there was disagreement between feelings and verbal message were scored as incongruent. The higher the score the more congruent the communication pattern. As seen in Figure 4, congruence varied with the importance of the situation and the importance of the relationship. More congruent responses were associated with those instances in which the consequences and relationships were important. It is in such situations that incongruent responses would represent a deviation from the norm and probably be associated with disordered functioning. However, at the other end of the spectrum, low importance, low relationship level situations, incongruent responses are more the rule than the exception and it is here that congruent responses would more likely be associated with deviant behavior.

The results of the study just described suggest that we cannot conceptualize congruence of messages outside of their context and that congruence should not be seen as necessarily the sine qua non of normality. Certainly in some very important situations it is; but in others it may not be. Seemingly then culturally effective functioning may not always involve being congruent, but rather having the ability to be both congruent and incongruent in communicating with others and knowing when which type of communicating is appropriate in a given situation.

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Summary

Based upon the notions of specific and generalized expectancies and upon other basic tenets of Rotter's social learning theory, we have presented a new conceptualization of interpersonal relationships. We believe that this new conceptualization is worthy of consideration because it weaves interpersonal relationships into the fabric of social learning theory with its already established body of literature and methodology. We have presented two studies based upon our reconceptualization of relationships within a four-phase social learning theory model. The results of these studies and several others completed in our laboratory encourage us to explore further the implications of social learning theory for the study of personality, human interaction, and psychotherapy.

Figure 1. A FOUR PHASE MODEL FOR INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

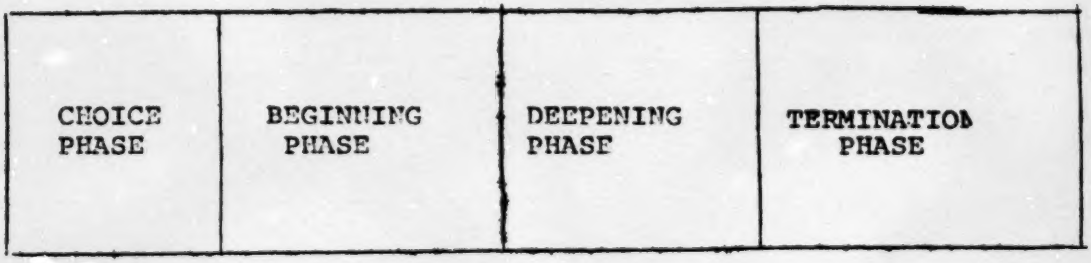

Figure 2. A SOCIAL LEARNING CONCEPTUALIZATION FO THE FOUR-PHASE MODEL

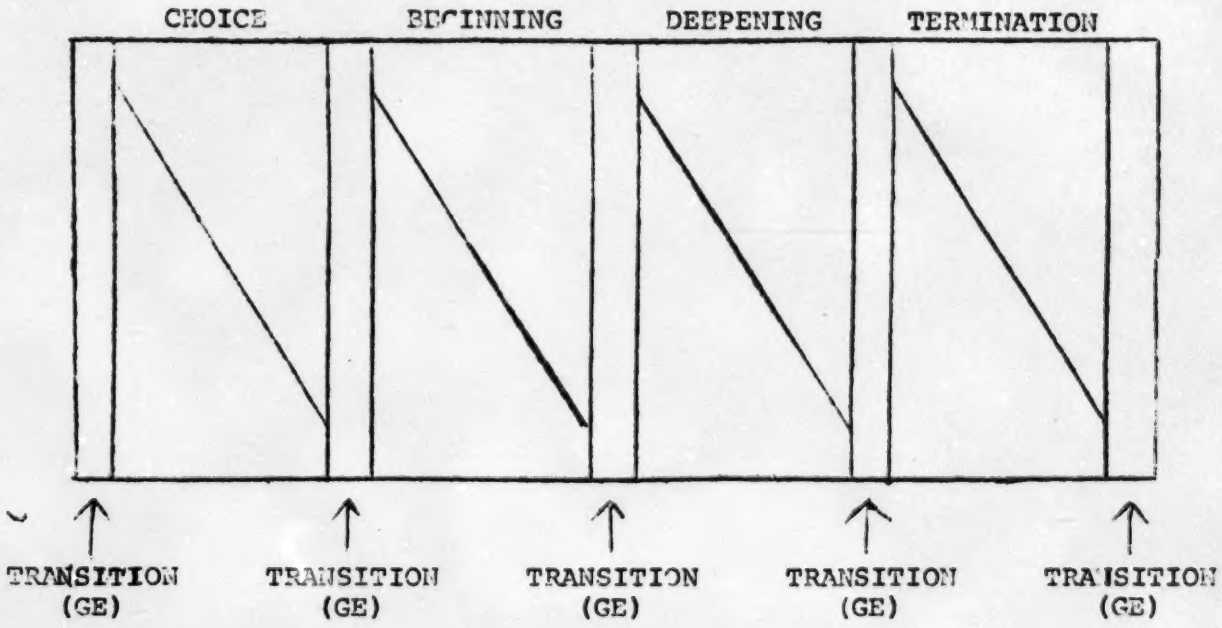

Figure 3. THE INTERACTION BETWEEN CONGRUENCE/ INCONGRUENCE AND SITUATION

	CONGRUENT COMMUNICATION	INCONGRUENT COMMUNICATION
SITUATIONALLY APPROPRIATE	ADAPTIVE CONGRUENCE	ADAPTIVE INCONGRUENCE
SITUATIONALLY INAPPROPRIATE	MALADAPTIVE CONGRUENCE	MALADAPTIVE INCONGRUENCE

Figure 4. Two Factor Schema for Comparison of Situational Importance and Level of Interpersonal Relationship in Determining the Level of Congruent Behaviors

		Situational Importance - Factor A: Low	Situational Importance - Factor A: High
Level of Relationship Factor B	Low	Situation 4 Mean = 97.82	Situation 2 Mean = 136.75
	High	Situation 3 Mean = 128.55	Situation 1 Mean = 143.30

This schematization was used in an attempt to determine the relative significance of situational importance and level of interpersonal relationship in determining the level of congruent behaviors.